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ABSTRACT

A discussion of the relationship between language teaching and research begins by defining research as a systematic process of inquiry in which the researcher poses a question or questions, collects relevant data, analyzes and interprets it, and makes the results accessible to others. It looks at the simplistic but persistent distinction between qualitative and quantitative methodologies. Some basic principles teachers can derive from research are summarized: (1) make instructional goals explicit to learners; (2) give learners opportunities to make their own contributions to the learning process; (3) encourage active communication through sequenced, achievable tasks; (4) provide opportunities for learners to apply their skills beyond the classroom; (5) teach learning strategies as well as content; (6) teach grammar in ways that show the essential harmony between form and function; (7) go beyond declarative knowledge to procedural skills development; (8) give learners an opportunity to work with authentic data; (9) maximize opportunities for learners to work cooperatively; and (10) provide learners with opportunities to self-monitor. Classroom research is encouraged to be made more contextualized and classroom-oriented, for closer links between teaching and research, for collaborative research, and for development of an extended vision of the nature of research. Contains 35 references. (MSE)

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Chapter 1

ED 415 692

Language Teaching and Research

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In this introductory paper, I should like to do three things. In the first place, I should like to articulate a vision of research which is in harmony with second and foreign language education. Secondly, I should like to summarize what I see as some of the things we have learned from research that can help us as we struggle to improve what we do in the classroom. The final thing I should like to do is to set out what I see as some important future trends for applied research in language education.

Approaches to Research

It is something of a curiosity to me that few of the recent spate of books on research in language education attempt to offer a definition of the term itself. So, years ago I asked a group of my graduate students, all language teachers who were embarking on an M.A. in Applied Linguistics, what the term meant for them. Some of their responses are set out below.

- Enquiry has two components: process and product. The process is about an area of enquiry and the process used to pursue that. The product is the knowledge generated from the process as well as the initial area to be presented.
- A process which involves (a) defining a problem, (b) stating an objective, and (c) formulating an hypothesis. It involves gathering information, classification, analysis, and interpretation to see to what extent the initial objective has been achieved.

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- Undertaking structured investigation which hopefully results in greater understanding of the chosen interest area. Ultimately, this investigation becomes accessible to the public.
- An activity which analyses and critically evaluates some problem.
- To collect and analyse the data in a specific field with the purpose of proving your theory.
- Evaluation, asking questions, investigations, analysis, confirming hypotheses, overview, gathering and analysing data in a specific field according to certain predetermined methods.

For me, research is a systematic process of inquiry in which the researcher poses a question or questions, collects relevant data on the question(s), analyses and interprets the questions, and makes the results of the inquiry publicly accessible in some way.

Donald Freeman, who has written extensively on research in TESOL is one person who has offered a characterization of research suggesting that it is "a basic process of developing and rendering viable interpretations for things in the world" (Freeman, 1996, p. 102). While this is a normal and natural part of everyday life, research differs from normal human curiosity through its systematicity and accessibility to scrutiny. In practical terms, research is a process of formulating questions or articulating "puzzles" relating to practice, collecting relevant data that might have a bearing on such questions or puzzles, interpreting and explaining the data, and making the results of the inquiry publicly accessible in some way (Nunan, 1992a). As Freeman pointed out, to give this process the label "research" is important because it gives the activity value. "When [the] questioning of practice takes place within a framework labeled 'research,' understanding the complexity of teaching can become a public and legitimate part of being a teacher" (Freeman, 1996, p. 103).

Many commentators argue that there are two competing traditions in research. The first of these, the quantitative tradition, is obtrusive and controlled and is concerned with established generalizable relationships between variables. The other, the qualitative tradition, is concerned with generating insight and understanding rather than establishing "truths." More recently, it has been argued that this distinction is simplistic and naive. Elsewhere, I have suggested that while the distinction was simplistic it is also persistent:

> One reason for the persistence of the distinction between quantitative and qualitative research, is that the two approaches represent different ways of thinking about and understanding the world around us. Underlying the development of different research traditions and methods is a debate on the nature of knowledge, and the status of assertions about the world, and the debate itself is ultimately a philosophical one. It is commonly assumed that the function of research is to add to our knowledge of the world and to demonstrate the 'truth' of the commonsense notions we have about the world. . . . In developing one's own philosophy on

> research, it is important for us to determine where we stand on the notion of 'truth' in relation to research. What is truth? (Even more basically, do we accept that there is such a thing as 'truth'?) What is evidence? Can we ever 'prove' anything? What evidence would compel us to accept the truth of an assertion or proposition? These are questions which need to be borne constantly in mind as one reads and evaluates research. (Nunan, 1992a, p. 10)

What Have We Learned From Research?

In conducting teacher education seminars on research methods, I am sometimes confronted with the view that research is an esoteric activity that has little to do with the real world, and little to say to the classroom practitioner. I beg to differ. While honest research is messy, the results often inconsistent if not contradictory, and the outcomes uncertain, research has helped to advance our understanding of the processes underlying language acquisition. I also believe that research can offer us an empirical basis for practice. At a recent conference in Brazil (Nunan, 1996b), I was asked to address the relationship of research to practice, and to spell out the practical implications of research for language pedagogy. I gave my own idiosyncratic list of principles that guide my teaching and materials writing that are derived from my own research and that of others. These I have reproduced below, along with the research from which they are derived.

1. Make instructional goals explicit to learners in ways they can understand.

- Goal setting can have exceptional importance in stimulating L2 learning and enhancing motivation (Oxford & Shearin, 1993).
- Motivation is enhanced when learning goals are made clear (Reilly, 1994).
- Learning was enhanced in classes where teachers made goals explicit. Explicit goal setting was relatively rare in classrooms observed (Nunan, 1996a).

2. Give learners opportunities to make their own contributions to the learning process.

- Learners have definite views on what they want to learn and how they want to learn. These are often at variance with the views of the teacher. Learning is enhanced when learners are involved in making choices (Nunan, 1987).
- Young learners are able to take responsibility for planning, organising, managing and evaluating their own learning (Dam & Gabrielsen, 1988).
- Students want to be involved in the selection of language content and the learning process. There are major mismatches between the desires of the students and the mandated curriculum (Widdows & Voller, 1991).
- Classroom topics nominated by learners were much more likely to be learned than topics determined by the teacher (Slimani, 1992).
- Learning is enhanced when students are actively involved in selecting content, learning tasks, and evaluation (Heath, 1992).

3. Encourage active communication through sequenced, achievable tasks.

- Spoken output in groupwork is a significant factor to the acquisition of vocabulary (Hall, 1991).
- Learner participation in class relates significantly to improvements in language proficiency (Lim, 1992).
- Motivation is enhanced when tasks are sequenced and linked in ways that make sense to the learner (Reilly, 1994).
- Active use of target language with strong emphasis on practice in naturalistic situations is notable in helping students attain higher proficiency (Green & Oxford, 1995).

4. Provide opportunities for learners to apply their skills beyond the classroom.

- Supplementing classroom instruction with out-of-class tasks results in significantly increased language gains (Montgomery & Eisenstein, 1985).
- Instruction and opportunities to communicate out of class are both necessary. Improvement occurred when subject consciously "noticed the gap" (Schmidt & Frota, 1986).
- The "good" foreign language learner finds ways of activating his or her language out of class (Nunan, 1991).

5. Teach learning strategies as well as language content.

- The ability to infer or induct rules is an important aspect of language aptitude (Carroll, 1981).
- Strategy training had a significant effect on speaking development (O'Malley, Chamot, Stewner-Manzanares, Russo, & Kupper, 1985).
- Effective learners are aware of the processes underlying their own learning and seek to use appropriate learning strategies to control their own learning (Jones, Palincsar, Ogle, & Carr, 1987).
- More effective learners use strategies more frequently, and use a greater variety of strategies than students designated as less effective learners (O'Malley & Chamot, 1990).
- Good learners are aware of strategies that worked for them, and can articulate these (Nunan, 1991).
- There is a significant relationship between strategy use and success in language learning (Green & Oxford, 1995).

6. Teach grammar in ways that show the essential harmony between form and function.

- Grammar exists in order to enable learners to communicate in increasingly sophisticated ways (Nunan, 1993).
- Grammar and vocabulary are best acquired through learner involvement in the processing and production of discourse (McCarthy & Carter, 1994).

7. Go beyond declarative knowledge to procedural skills development.

- "Communicative" classrooms with instruction plus opportunities for interaction are superior to "traditional" instruction and also to immersion programs (Spada, 1990).
- Formal instruction resulted in acquisition of some structures (passives) but not others (tense and aspect). Explicit (declarative) knowledge can be converted to implicit (procedural) knowledge through practice (Zhou, 1991).
- Declarative knowledge (ability to identify errors and state rule violation) does not lead to procedural knowledge (ability to put known forms to communicative effect) without opportunities to activate knowledge through output activities (Wudong, 1994).

8. Give learners an opportunity to work with authentic data.

- Non-authentic data misrepresents the nature of genuine communication (Nunan, 1991).
- Authenticity significantly enhances motivation in foreign language classes (Ho, 1995).

9. Maximize opportunities for learners to work cooperatively.

- Small group tasks prompt students to use a greater range of language functions than teacher fronted tasks (Long, Adams, & Castanos, 1976).
- Cooperative learning leads to positive interdependence but also individual accountability, extensive face-to-face interaction, and the development of social skills (Kohonen, 1992).

10. Provide learners with opportunities to self-monitor and self-check.

- Opportunities for learners to self-monitor and self-check lead to greater sensitivity to the learning process. Learners develop skills in articulating what they want to learn and how they want to learn (Nunan, 1995).

Future Trends

And so to the future. What direction would I like to see research in language education taking? I believe that a future research agenda should be contextualised and classroom oriented. It should forge closer links between teaching and research of the type indicated in the body of this paper. It should encourage collaboration between researchers, teachers and students. And, finally, it should seek to extend our vision of research. Each of these points is commented on below.

1. Contextualized and classroom-oriented.

The need for research to be contextualized is slowly being recognised. Even university-based researchers with little direct contact to classroom realities are beginning to recognise the limited applicability of research outcomes which

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have been derived from contexts other than those in which teaching and learning typically occur. To acknowledge that context affects behavior is to acknowledge that conclusions reached in one context can be taken as nothing more than working hypotheses in other contexts.

2. Closer links between teaching and research.

Related to the first point is an appreciation of the need for developing closer links between teaching and research. Allwright and Bailey (1991) coined the phrase "exploratory teaching" to capture this alternative vision in which it is unnecessary to decide whether one is engaged in teaching or research; rather one is engaged in both. In other words, exploratory teaching describes a philosophical stance or attitude of mind towards one's classroom practice. It is an ongoing process of working constantly for deeper understanding and increasing effectiveness in the classroom. Underlying their approach to reflective teaching are the assumptions that (a) autonomous teachers are the key link between teaching, learning, and research, and (b) becoming more effective as a teacher is a life-long, spiraling process.

> The teacher is the researcher's link with learners, and also the learners' link with research. The teacher is contracted to help learners learn, but can do so better by knowing about previous research and by using the procedures of classroom research to understand better what is happening in his or her own classroom. In this way the exploratory teacher will not only improve achievement but will also contribute to our general research knowledge about how language classrooms work. This is what we mean by 'exploratory teaching'—teaching that not only tries out new ideas, but that also tries to learn as much as possible from doing so. . . . Any good experienced teacher will no doubt spend a lot of class time on ideas that are tried and trusted. Turning that 'good' teaching into 'exploratory' teaching is a matter of trying to find out what makes the tried and trusted ideas successful. (Allwright & Bailey, 1991, p. 197)

3. Collaborative research.

Collaborative research is research in which all those involved in the research process, teacher-researchers, administrators, and informants have an active role and a voice within the process itself. The term also refers to inquiry carried out by multiple participants across a number of teaching sites. The value of collaboration is slowly being recognised, and is something which the field should seek to encourage. Such collaboration can be facilitated by the networks and systems (electronic and otherwise), which can help to link together individuals who might be working in different contexts (and even different countries). Teacher-researchers who collaborate can generate more powerful ideas, initiate more interesting research, and achieve more useful outcomes, than those working in isolation. A useful question for consideration is: "What are the

central characteristics of a collaborative approach to classroom research, and in what ways do the different contributions of teachers, learners and researchers provide us with insights which would be difficult to obtain in any other way?" (Nunan, 1992b, p. 8).

4. An extended vision of the nature of research.
There is growing acceptance within the social sciences generally that researchers need to develop a greater range of models, tools, and analytical techniques. Teacher-researchers working in language education should develop an extended vision of the nature of research. They should extend the theoretical bases of the research as well as the range of research tools, techniques, and methods. While conventional research methods—experiments, ethnographies, case studies and the like—have their place within a practitioner-oriented research agenda, there is a need to go beyond these. Ways of extending the agenda exist in the literature. These include focused teaching (Allwright & Bailey, 1991), action research (Nunan, 1989), narrative accounts (Freeman, 1994).

The four key principles set out in this section underlie my vision of the kind of research agenda I would like to develop and promote. Such an agenda, while not rejecting quantitative research, seeks to enhance the status of constructivist, humanistic research paradigms which are focused on understanding and explaining the contexts in which language education is conducted around the world. Insight and understanding, rather than causality and proof capture the essence of the perspective I am trying to promote.

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